

Editorials

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StarTribune

Young women and breast cancer

- Properly targeted, an education campaign can help save lives.

Conventional medical practice begins screening women for breast cancer at age 40. That's based on sound science and statistics. At age 20, a woman's chance of developing the disease within a decade is one in 1,837. By age 60, that risk rises to one in 26.

Yet, of the 250,000 American women diagnosed with breast cancer every year, about 10 percent are under 45. In fact, breast cancer is the leading cause of cancer deaths in younger women. That's why it's important to improve education and awareness about the disease in that age group.

The Breast Cancer Education and Awareness Requires Learning Young Act, known as the EARLY Act, would do just that. The bill was introduced earlier this year by bipartisan groups of lawmakers in both the U.S. House and Senate. Minnesota's Sen. Amy Klobuchar coauthored the Senate version with Sen. Olympia Snowe, a Republican from Maine. In the House, the bill has more than 300 supporters; in the Senate, it has 31.

Under the Senate plan, the government would fund a public campaign run by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention to teach young women how to detect and prevent breast cancer. It would encourage clinical and self-exams, more genetic counseling and lifestyle changes to reduce the risk of breast cancer. The EARLY Act would allocate about \$36 million over four years to get more information to health care providers and community groups and expand support services for younger women battling the disease.

Some cancer researchers and organizations have expressed concern about the legislation. Opponents say that because there is no 100 percent effective screening method for 20-

to 30-somethings, raising awareness would cause unnecessary alarm. They worry that a call for increased self-examination among young women could also trigger more mammograms, MRIs, false alarms and unnecessary biopsies.

But the difficulty of diagnosing breast cancer in younger patients is what makes awareness so important. Because breast tissue is more dense in 20- to 40-year-olds, mammograms and MRIs don't always find tumors. Nearly 80 percent of young women diagnosed find the abnormality themselves.

Some studies have shown that because younger women don't believe they *can* get the disease, they don't bother to check. Raising awareness about clinical and self-exams would help increase early diagnosis.

Due to concerns raised by the American Cancer Society and others, authors of the legislation have already made sensible modifications. The lower age of the target group has been raised from 15 to 21. And the bill focuses special efforts to target higher-risk groups. Women under 40 who have family histories of breast cancer, are African-American or of Ashkenazi Jewish heritage, for example, are more likely to get the disease.

According to the Susan G. Komen organization and other advocacy groups, survival rates are the lowest for women in their 20s and 30s. At that age, women are often less likely to seek early medical attention, leading to later detection and diagnoses at more advanced stages.

Like many forms of cancer, early detection is key to successful treatment and survival. Therefore, an education campaign aimed at younger women would be a practical investment.